

# Austin American-Statesman

COMMENTARY

## Hanks: Films offer a glimpse of our global neighbors

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Travel is often considered broadening, giving one panache, polish and a proper perspective on world events.

Alas, the scandalous price of oil, the expense of mountain-climbing Sherpa guides and yaks, combined with the reality that most Americans are lucky to get two weeks of vacation make it difficult for most Austinites to get farther than Port Aransas.

Increasing globalization makes it vital to know what's going on in our world. Unfortunately, articles on international topics tend to be dryer than leftover toast. What to do?

My solution: seeing new foreign films that present geopolitical realities without making you snore.

"I think it gives you insight into a foreign culture that goes beyond what a newspaper article can provide," my former professor Edward Manouelian said about foreign fiction and films. Manouelian is an assistant professor in the University of Texas' Department of Slavic and Eurasian Studies.

Luckily, with ever-dropping film production costs and newfangled digital editing, it's possible to make films cheaper and more quickly than 30 years ago. Nowadays, international films can reach us while they're still fresh.

This year, Fantastic Fest, Austin's science fiction and horror film festival at the Alamo Draffhouse Cinema South Lamar, is showing lots of recent international films, including works from Japan, Sweden, India and Estonia. Many of these genre films were made to exploit the subconscious fears and phobias of their society. It's like peeking inside the head of a culture.

Because of last week's Hungarian protests, I especially wanted to see Áron Gauder's animated film "Nyócker! (2004)" aka "The District!"

The Hungarian protests began a little more than a week ago, when a recording of Socialist Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany, 45, was leaked. On the tape, Gyurcsany admitting lying about the health of Hungary's economy to win re-election.

"We lied in the morning; we lied in the evening," Gyurcsany said.

Since the leak, Hungarians have been demonstrating in the capital, Budapest, resulting in burned cars, 200-plus people injured and nearly as many arrested. On Saturday, 20,000 protesters gathered at the Hungarian Parliament. Despite the

protests, which have been getting smaller, Gyurcsany hasn't resigned.

"The District!" brings a tiny bit of context to this complicated Hungarian unrest. When I think of Hungary, I think of fiddles and paprika and goulash, not poverty and rival gangs.

"The District!" is an improbable cross-pollination of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" via "West Side Story" (1961), wrong-side-of-the-tracks rapper Eminem's autobiographical "8 Mile" (2002), and 1950s sci-fi.

In the film, the ethnically Roma (Gypsy) hero, Ricsi Lakatos, son of the Roma gang boss, loves Julika Csorba, daughter of the Hungarian gang boss.

Lakatos' grandpa tells him he needs money to make women love him. Determined to make moola, our hero cooks up a wacky plan. He persuades a school chum to invent a time machine. They zoom back in time, bury woolly mammoths under the district, and zip home to collect their oil money.

At Fantastic Fest's Saturday midnight showing of "The District!" I happened to sit next to Barbara Karia-Martón, 31, who had grown up in Budapest. She told me the film's title would be better translated as "The 8th District!" That's the notorious Budapest area that has the sex shops, prostitutes and racial tensions depicted in the film. Apparently, the film is an exaggeration of the 8th District's problems, since lessened by the ghetto's 1990s urban renewal.

Karia-Martón, who lived in Budapest's 9th District, right next door, said the film gives a recognizable picture of the district then, but not of Hungary overall.

I guess it's like watching director Richard Linklater's "Slacker" (1991) and hoping to understand Austin's tech economy. It's a start, but clearly not the whole picture.

If time travel and science fiction aren't your thing, you'll have other opportunities to increase your global understanding and popcorn consumption. In October, Austin will have more international film screenings than you can shake a passport at. They include films at the first Austin Polish Film Festival and the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival. Such screenings are among the cheapest possible world travel. They're also more fun than reading *The Economist*.

"The District!" will be shown at 4 p.m. today at the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema South Lamar. Fantastic Fest runs through Thursday.